

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-A

MIAMI HERALD
18 September 1985

Prominent Panama foe is found beheaded

By SAM DILLON
Herald Staff Writer

PANAMA — Hugo Spadafora, one of Central America's best-known guerrillas, a veteran of wars in Africa and Nicaragua who was recently reported plotting against Panama's military strongman, was found beheaded hours after witnesses claim he was detained by a Panamanian army intelligence agent.

Spadafora, 45, disappeared as he traveled last Friday from the Costa Rican capital of San Jose to Panama. Authorities in San Jose Tuesday identified a headless body found under a bridge in southern Costa Rica, near the Panamanian border, as Spadafora's.

Relatives claim that a Panamanian soldier detained Spadafora at the border 17 hours before the body was found.

Panama's military authorities, generally regarded as harsh on opponents but not murderous, denied they had detained Spadafora

and called the accusations "biased."

Panama's attorney general, Manuel Jose Calvo, said in an interview Tuesday, however, that he had ordered an investigation of the charges.

Friends in Costa Rica said the adventurous Spadafora was involved in a series of other murky affairs, unrelated to Panamanian politics, that could have brought him many other enemies.

A physician and member of a prominent Panamanian family, Spadafora considered himself an "internationalist" willing to fight any repressive government of the left or right.

In 1965 he fought alongside guerrillas who won independence for Portugal's African colony of Portuguese Guinea, later renamed Guinea-Bissau. Spadafora had met the rebels' top leader, Amilcar Cabral, while studying medicine in Europe.

He returned to Panama and became a protege of Gen. Omar Torrijos, a left-leaning military strongman who had seized power in a 1968 coup.

But in 1978 Spadafora left his post as vice minister of health and joined the Sandinista revolution against Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza, commanding a 350-man "internationalist brigade" made up of volunteers from Panama and several South American nations trained and equipped by Torrijos.

After Torrijos died in a 1981 plane crash, Spadafora became involved in a bitter feud with the new military chief, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, accusing the taciturn former intelligence chief of drug trafficking and other corruption.

Spadafora then joined one-time Sandinista hero Eden Pastora in fighting the Sandinista

government, accusing it of Marxist extremism. He broke with Pastora in mid-1983, briefly joined the MISURASATA alliance of Nicaraguan Indians fighting the Sandinistas, and finally retired in early 1984, moving into a San Jose house with his Costa Rican-born wife, Arianne.

He told The Miami Herald during a San Jose interview last July that he was "trying to start something special with a few other guys." Friends said he was trying to raise another "international brigade" to fight the Sandinistas and later turn its sights on Noriega.

Spadafora had recently been trying to raise funds for the anti-Sandinista war and had worked with a Tennessee-based group, the American Freedom Fighters Association, the group's spokesman John Cattle said Tuesday. Cattle, who saw Spadafora Friday in San Jose, said he had "political enemies in Panama who had threatened his life."

Spadafora was known to have returned occasionally to Panama to visit family and friends, usually crossing the border by land in order to avoid the Defense Forces' surveillance at the Panama City international airport.

A close associate, Dr. Abdiel Juliao, said in an interview that Spadafora had traveled by light plane Friday from San Jose to a small airstrip on a banana plantation near the Panama border. He crossed the border at noon at Paso Canoas aboard a bus that continued to the town of Bugaba, a hub for bus lines 14 miles into Panama, Juliao said.

In Bugaba, according to a Panama City lawyer hired by the family, witnesses reported that

Spadafora was forced off the bus at about 3 p.m. by another passenger who had been traveling in civilian clothes.

The lawyer, Diogenes Arosemena, said the bus driver, a local merchant and other witnesses recalled that Spadafora had loudly identified himself by name and complained he was being arrested by a member of "G-2," a commonly used term for the Defense Forces' intelligence arm.

Witnesses said he was taken to the small Defense Force outpost in Bugaba.

A Costa Rican peasant discovered Spadafora's decapitated body

at 8 a.m. Saturday under a bridge near the town of El Robelito, in the Costa Rican province of Laure, about 35 miles from Bugaba.

Spadafora friends initially identified the body — the head remains missing — by a scar on the right leg. Costa Rican authorities Tuesday said they had confirmed the identification with fingerprint records provided by Panama.

Arosemena, representing Spadafora's 78-year-old father, Carmelo, former governor of northern Chitre province, filed a court suit demanding the Defense Forces confirm or deny it was holding his

son on Sunday, before news of the body's discovery reached Panama.

The Defense Forces told the Supreme Court they had not detained Spadafora, and, in a communique issued hours later, Defense Force spokesman Lt. Col. Juliao Ow Young called the petition "a biased campaign ... aimed at scandal and calumny."

Noriega, the Defense Force's intelligence chief before he assumed overall command in 1983, was traveling outside of Panama and unavailable for comment.

Noriega, considered the most powerful person in Panama, has often been accused of harassing and intimidating his critics. But there have been virtually no reports of government-ordered murders since the mid-1970s.

End

2.

Spadafora had recently published a book and several opinion columns in Panama's opposition La Prensa newspaper in which he repeatedly accused Noriega of narcotics trafficking and widespread corruption but offered little proof.

His friends in Costa Rica said, however, that any of a number of Spadafora's activities could have earned him deadly enemies.

Spadafora was a friend of a Cuban-born anti-Sandinista rebel suspected by some of Pastora's aides of having taken part in a 1984 assassination attempt against Pastora. They said they didn't suspect Spadafora, but kept him at arm's length after the attempt.

Costa Rican authorities also have said Spadafora's name had come up in connection with their investigation into 4.4 pounds of pure cocaine hidden within a shipment of anti-Sandinista guerrilla weapons found in a San Jose garage last year. The cocaine was traced to a one-time Spadafora friend now living in Panama.

HUGO SPADAFORA

Slain Central American guerrilla

BACKGROUND: A physician, considered himself an "internationalist" willing to fight repression from both the right and the left ... in 1965, fought with rebels in Portugal's African colony of Portuguese Guinea ... protege of Panama's late Gen. Omar Torrijos ... in 1978, joined the successful Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, but later fought against the Sandinistas ... accused Panama's current strongman, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, of drug trafficking and other corruption.



PERSONAL: Born Sept. 6, 1940 ... in 1964, graduated with medical degree from Bologna University in Italy ... wife, Arianne, is Costa Rican-born ... had a daughter, Africa, and son, Hugo, from an earlier marriage ... published *The Experience and Thought of a Guerrilla Doctor* in 1980 ... father, Carmelo, 78, is son of Italian immigrants and former governor of northern Chitre province.

QUOTE: "We have fought in foreign lands for a cause that is Panamanian [because] we never want to have to fight in our own country."